

A chilling message for journalists

Murder of B'baria reporter a reminder that press freedom remains under threat

The state of press freedom in Bangladesh is once again in the spotlight after a journalist was killed in Brahmanbaria on Monday. According to a report by *The Daily Star*, the victim, Ashiqur Rahman, 27, was the district correspondent of daily *Porzobekkhon*, and also a member of Batighar, a local voluntary organisation that buries unclaimed dead bodies. According to police, he was stabbed to death by some men days after a scuffle “over a trivial matter” between the victim and the main suspect, Raihan Mia, whom police have since detained. Raihan is said to be an activist of Chhatra League, the student wing of the ruling party.

Regardless of the motive behind the killing, the fact that a journalist could be killed over a trivial matter is itself a statement – a chilling message, if you will – and we must take note. It shows how vulnerable journalists still are in the country, despite claims to the contrary. A murder is but the most extreme form of consequences they might face for their work. It's easy to be misguided by the relative lack of such extremes in Bangladesh. But such extremes, we must remember, are the inevitable by-product of an environment in which journalists have to deal with the threats of physical, psychological and legal repercussions constantly hanging over their heads.

Only the other day, we came across such a situation in which another local correspondent of a newspaper was brutalised after he tried to investigate illegal brick kilns in Chattogram. Reportedly, he was held by a local UP member at gunpoint, kept hostage for over an hour, and beaten repeatedly. Even the local UP chairman, clearly in cahoots with the attackers, threatened him over phone that “nothing will happen” if a journalist is killed. We are yet to hear of any action being taken against these people. In such a culture of impunity, the difference between life and death is often decided by the individual choice of the criminals.

As we have commented then, these incidents show how lack of accountability is having a spill-over effect across the board, with anyone with the remotest link to the ruling party feeling entitled to using violence as a means, regardless of the “end” they want to achieve. For journalists who must work with those in politics/power because of the nature of their profession, the stakes are very high. This is not unknown to the ruling politicians either; one of them even acknowledged the incidence of journalist torture late last month. As well as physical violence, journalists had to contend with legal consequences as well. All this has resulted in the space for journalists, and the media in general, eroding dangerously, to the point that Bangladesh ranked 162nd among 180 countries in last year's World Press Freedom Index.

We urge the ruling camp to take a hard, critical look at this state of affairs – and into its own questionable ecosystem – and undertake necessary measures to ensure press freedom. The killers of Ashiqur Rahman and other slain journalists as well as enemies of the press must be held accountable.

Don't let politics derail education

State minister should answer for mass school closure to attend son's reception

We are shocked to learn that 264 government primary schools in three upazilas of Kurigram were closed for a day because the teachers, including headmasters, had to attend the wedding reception of the son of State Minister for Primary and Mass Education Zakir Hossain. Reportedly, over 1,200 schoolteachers from the Chilmari, Roumari and Rajibpur upazilas were “invited” to the event in Roumari town where, according to sources, attendance was “compulsory”. One guardian told our reporter that the authorities of his son's school did not even give any prior notice about the closure.

The entire episode demonstrates how education – at all levels – is being disrupted by political influence in the country.

While we often hear of the politicisation of public universities – where it is more embedded, and by now generally accepted – the same happening in public schools and colleges, albeit in a different form, is not talked about enough. The Kurigram incident is only one example of how this takes place. You see reports in the media about school playgrounds being used for political purposes, such as meetings, or wedding parties of politically influential people. You see school and college students being lined or paraded to welcome influential people. Such practices not only hamper educational activities but also, in the absence of protests or corrective action, help normalise what is without a doubt a very disturbing trend. The incident that happened in Kurigram, which clearly required coordination to ensure all 264 schools were closed simultaneously, is an extreme example of political influence at the pre-tertiary level.

Naturally, it left us with a number of questions. For example, why was attending the event made “compulsory” for the teachers and headmasters of these schools? Who gave the school authorities the instruction to close for the sake of the reception? Did the authorities take the decision following any rule? We understand that when an incumbent minister invites schoolteachers of his constituency to his son's wedding, the latter may feel obligated to go there. This feeling of obligation – or coercion, in other words – speaks volumes about the extent of influence a senior ruling party politician has over schools in their region.

The incident also exposes the all-encompassing influence of politics in our society, spreading down to the most basic tier of education – primary schools. It is also a manifestation of how, as a society, we have failed to prioritise education. We think the state minister, who as a guardian for primary and mass education in Bangladesh, should explain this most un-guardian-like behaviour to the students in his constituency. The parliament should also seek explanation from him to ensure such conduct is never repeated. We must keep our educational institutions above political influence at all costs, and fix the problems plaguing the sector if we want to build a knowledge economy to prepare for the challenges that lie ahead.

Hefazat's politics and the government's policies



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Sometimes it feels intriguing why some issues kick off fierce debate and others don't. One such less discussed, but hugely significant development, was the Hefazat delegation's recent meeting with prime minister Sheikh Hasina.

Very little has been divulged about the December 17, 2022 parley, other than the home minister telling the media that the PM will definitely look into the demands made by the Hefazat-e-Islam leaders and fulfil those which are deemed reasonable. Hefazat leaders, too, have said nothing much, except describing the meeting as “very fruitful.” The Bangla daily *Bhorer Kagoj* quoted Maulana Meer Idris as saying, “The meeting with the prime minister was very fruitful. She heard us with seriousness.”

Press reports say Hefazat had a meeting on the same day under the banner of National Ulama Mashayekh Conference. The conference held at Kazi Bashir Auditorium in Gulistan was attended by representatives of the organisation from all parts of the country. A seven-point charter of demands was drafted, to be given to the PM. It wouldn't be unreasonable to assume that those are the same demands that the home minister referred to that the PM would look into.

So, what were those demands? According to *Prothom Alo*, they were: 1) Release of Alem-Ulama, and Hefazat leaders and workers; 2) Withdrawal of all cases lodged against them; 3) Enact blasphemy law making provisions for punishments for slandering against Islam and the Prophet (PBUH); 4) Declare Kadiyanis non-Muslim by the state; 5) Making religious education mandatory in educational curricula; 6) Ensure representation of Al-Hiyatul Uliya Lil Jamiatul Kawmia Bangladesh in the board that prepares curriculum and textbooks; and 7) Not allow Indian preacher Maulana Muhammad Saad Kandhalvi to attend this year's Biswa Jtema.

Before proceeding further, it needs to be made clear that everyone should be presumed innocent until a court of law convicts someone for any specific crime, and the right to get bail – unless



FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

there are exceptional reasons, like posing a danger to society – and a speedy trial are essential elements of the rule of law. No one, irrespective of being an Alem or a secular person, a political opponent or a supporter of the government, should be kept in prison prolonging their trials unjustifiably, and no one should be subjected to imprisonment or implicated in any prosecution without sufficient grounds.

It must be noted here that many of the imprisoned Hefazat activists were detained for protesting against the visit of Indian PM Narendra Modi in March 2021, when the protests became violent and more than a dozen lives were lost. There were allegations of high-handedness in policing the protest and thousands of Hefazat activists were implicated in a number of cases in various parts of the country. Unfortunately, mass arrests and political harassment are nothing new in Bangladesh. But, we can only hope that all those left behind bars on flimsy grounds or with insufficient proof will get relief through the judicial process.

home minister during preceding months.

According to *Bhorer Kagoj*, before 2019, the now deceased former military secretary to the PM, Major General Mia Mohammad Zainul Abedin, was the person who used to liaise with the then Hefazat supremo, late Allama Shafi. After General Abedin's death, Hefazat leaders reached out to home minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal.

One may well wonder: Was the home minister convinced that such an anti-constitutional demand could be forwarded to the prime minister?

The answer probably lies somewhere else. If we refresh our memory and look back to 2018, we might be able to draw some conclusions.

On November 3, 2018, virtually addressing a discussion on the Jail Killing Day, PM Hasina said: “When we assumed office in 2008, many incidents and conspiracies like the BDR carnage and Hefazat's so-called movement were carried out to remove Awami League from power.” But, on November 4, the day after, she attended a grand reception organised

country's secular forces, and the ruling party's main challenger, the BNP.

In the ensuing years, a few changes had taken place mysteriously in school textbooks, which many educationists have alleged were done at the behest of Hefazat. Their new demand of granting them a seat on the curriculum board, therefore, raises further concerns about the prospect of pushing our education system back to a state where science and philosophy may not receive due emphasis.

There is no doubt that the current state of the relationship between this ultra-conservative Islamic group and the ruling party is the result of the long-held silence of the so-called secular allies of the ruling party for their political opportunism. These allies have lost their moral standing to counter, or at the very least, oppose the policy of appeasing the ultra-conservatives.

As we approach another general election, and with the BNP on the path towards a revival, the utmost thing of worry is that such appeasement will only intensify.

112TH BIRTH ANNIVERSARY OF JUSTICE SYED MAHBUB MURSHED

A lion-hearted pioneer

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ANWAR A KHAN

Syed Mahbub Murshed (January 11, 1911 to April 3, 1969) was a Bangladeshi lawyer, jurist, and a reformer. He served as the chief justice of the then East Pakistan High Court from early 1964 till late 1967.

He understood how East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) worked, the fundamental realities of our society, and how laws should be administered and applied in our context.

Justice Murshed also shook the bar out of its lethargy and modernised it as far as possible. And he transformed our judiciary through a relentless push for progress and excellence within the four years of being in office.

His jurisprudential approach was also marked by pragmatism, boldness, and conviction. Throughout his life, Justice Murshed preached, berated, pontificated and counselled his own people.

His grandeur was rooted in his strong intellect and his prodigious ability to look beyond the horizon. During the regime of Pakistani military dictator Ayub Khan, Murshed gave bail to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman sitting in his car in front of the then Commissioner's office. The Advocate General opposed this by stating that the then East Pakistan's Governor, Monem Khan, would not like it. To this Murshed said, “Tell the governor that I am the law.”

Justice Murshed was the first



Postage stamp featuring Justice Syed Mahbub Murshed.

arrested were released due to Justice Murshed's courage.

He also actively participated in the Language Movement. On February 21, 1952, after attending the funeral prayers of the language martyrs, then Barrister Murshed and his uncle Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Huq led a procession, breaking section 144. As a result, near SM Hall of Dhaka University, the police charged with truncheons and both uncle and nephew were arrested for a few hours.

After a brilliant academic career both in the subcontinent and in England, Syed Mahbub Murshed began his career as a barrister first in

hover around the Bar.”

In 1954, Murshed was elevated to the Bench of the High Court's Eastern Wing in Dhaka. As a judge, he remained committed to his lifelong ideals of liberty, justice, and excellence. Some of Justice Murshed's judgements created constitutional history and not only won him national fame but also international acclaim. He remained a reflection of courage despite pressures from the highest quarters.

Being a humanitarian all his life, the famine that gripped Bengal in the 1940s and the communal riots of 1946 moved Murshed to found the welfare organisation Anjuman Mohdul Islam.